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AUTHOR Chen, Guo-Ming
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ABSTRACT

Employing participant observation methodology, this paper analyzes a 4-hour meeting held among the representatives of a large religious organization in Taiwan. The analysis focuses on the influence of seniority on the Chinese decision making process. Five components of decision making proposed by Stewart (1985) and Kume (1985) were used for the purpose of analysis. The findings extend the Chen and Starosta (1997) argument that although seniority, as the locus of power and authority in Chinese society, is normally used to reinforce and perpetuate Chinese cultural values, it may be abused for gaining personal interests. The abuse of senior power, as this case shows, leads to paralysis of the decision making process. Findings demonstrate the dynamic and complex nature of decision making in terms of its dialectic relationship with culture. A person's behavior is the mirror of his/her culture. Culture provides a set of thinking patterns that leads to a specific way of action. Intercultural communication scholars should undertake research on deviations from cultural value orientations. Chung (1996) proposed a model of multilevel cultures for Chinese decision making; Hwang (1997) proposed a model of conflict resolution in Chinese society. The two models deserve a further examination for future research. (Contains 27 references.) (Author/CR)

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Seniority and Superiority: A Case Analysis of Chinese Decision Making

Guo-Ming Chen
Department of Communication Studies
University of Rhode Island
Kingston, RI 02881
Tel: (401) 874-2552
E-mail: cqm101@uriacc.uri.edu

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Abstract

Employed the participant observation methodology, this paper analyzes a 4-hour meeting held among the representatives of a large religion organization in Taiwan. The analysis focuses on the influence of seniority on the Chinese decision making process. Five components of decision making proposed by Stewart (1985) and Kume (1985) were used for the purpose of analysis. The findings extend Chen and Starosta (1997) argument that although seniority, as the locus of power and authority in Chinese society, is normally used to reinforce and perpetuate Chinese cultural values, it may be abused for gaining personal interests. The abuse of senior power, as this case shows, leads to the paralysis of decision making process. Applications and limitation for this kind of research are also discussed.

Seniority and Superiority: A Case Analysis of Chinese Decision Making

Although age is a universal issue all human societies must face, the way to perceive and handle the issue varies in different cultures. Traditionally, because the elders were considered as the locus of knowledge, power, and authority, the value of age has been dominant in most cultures (Condon & Yousef, 1975). However, the change of time gradually leads a society to develop a different orientation toward the value of age. Condon and Yousef (1975) indicated that there are three distinct value orientations toward age in modern societies: youth, the middle years, and old age. The United States is an example of youth-valuing culture in which idealism and vigor are emphasized, while many African nations are old age valuing cultures where seniority is highly respected.

Most Asian nations also highly value seniority, which refers to age and length of service in an organization, especially those are influenced by Confucianism such as China, Japan, and Korea. For example, Palmore (1975) pointed out that in Japan the aged enjoy a high status not only in the family, but also in work force and in the community. This is evidenced by the honorific language used to show respect to the elderly; by the special treatment of the elderly in the household, and by the national policy that is made to protect the elders' welfare (Carmichael, 1991). Nishyama (1971) also described that seniority is one of the most critical factors in determining a person's authority and status in an organization. The Japanese companies always hire newly college graduates because they fear the experienced persons may disrupt the system of respecting seniority.

In the Chinese world the Confucian teaching of Five Code of Ethics dictates a rigid hierarchical structure of human relationship in which seniority is accorded a great range of authority, power, and status (Bond & Hwang, 1986). Senior persons enjoy

relative freedom in initiating an idea, a topic, or a decision in personal or social interactions. Seniority not only determines whether the message is considered important, but also commands respect and disarms criticism in the Chinese society. The elderly as well play a very important role in Chinese politics. For example, in his study of the 1990 Taiwanese election campaign Chung (1996) explicated that seniority is one of the most discernible factors for the Taiwan president to recruit mediators for resolving a serious problem in the process of nominating candidates. The age of the eight mediators recruited ranges from 78 and 92.

Chen and Starosta (1997) proposed a model of Chinese conflict management and resolution that reflects the impact of seniority on the Chinese decision making process. The authors argued that harmony, inter-relation, face, and power are the four major factors dominating the process of Chinese conflict management and resolution. Harmony is the axis of the wheel of Chinese social interaction. It is the end of human communication. All Chinese interactions are aiming to develop and keep a harmonious relationship in a transforming process of interdependency among interactants.

Inter-relation and face sustain the smooth movement of the harmonious social interaction. The Chinese emphasize particularistic relationships or the distinction between ingroup and outgroup members. They use particular relationships to persuade, influence, and control their counterparts in social interactions to avoid or resolve conflicts (Shenkar & Ronen, 1987). For example, Ma (1992) found that in China the unofficial mediation for interpersonal conflicts is usually done by a friend or an ingroup member of the conflicting parties to avoid the embarrassing direction communication. Face saving is a way to heighten self-esteem of interactants. To the Chinese losing one's face will

immediately lead to an emotional uneasiness or a severe conflict. Thus, to "make face" or "earn face" for one's counterpart in interactions is a prerequisite for establishing a harmonious atmosphere (Chiao, 1981, 1988).

While harmony, inter-relation, and face are closely interrelated, according to Chen and Starosta's model, power is the ultimate determinant in forming the pattern of Chinese social interaction. In Confucianism influenced societies seniority is the main source of gaining power. In other words, the power ascribed to seniority gives the elderly authority to control the direction or quality of Chinese social interactions. Although most often the power of seniority is invested in pursuing harmony in the Chinese society, harmony can be sacrificed when power is "abused and engenders a negative force that destroys the ethical principle of relationship structure and face saving system" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p.9). Existing literature has described the impact of seniority on Chinese social interactions, however, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the influencing process of seniority especially on decision making. It is then the purpose of this study to examine the impact of seniority on Chinese decision making process by case analyzing a meeting of a large religion organization in Taiwan.

Five components of decision making proposed by Stewart (1985) and Kume (1985) are adopted in this study for the purpose of analysis. The components were originally used to compare the differences among cultures. It was assumed that due to different cultural value orientations, each culture will have its unique way to make decisions regarding the components. For example, Americans were found to be more rational, direct, confrontational, and the leader tends to direct and take personal responsibility in the process of decision making, while the Japanese are more intuitive,

indirect, emphasizing harmony, and the leader tends to facilitate and take share responsibility (Kume, 1985). The five components include locus of decision, initiation and coordination, mode of reaching decision, decision criterion, and communication style. Locus of decision refers the location where ultimate decisions are made. Initiation and coordination imply how the information or idea towards decisions is initiated and coordinated among those involving in the decision making process. Mode of reaching decision refers to how the final decision is reached. Decision criterion refers to bases with which a decision is made. Finally, communication style refers to patterns of communication among persons involving in the decision making process. This study, instead of comparing the differences of decision making between the Chinese and other cultures, focuses on the analysis of how seniority affects the five components in the Chinese decision making process.

The Case

Background

On December 31, 1995, the president of Shanyan Jiao (a pseudo name of a religion group in Taiwan) called for a representative meeting to discuss minutes from the last meeting. Among them ten items need to be approved by the representatives in order to fulfill the requirement of Taiwanese Interior Cabinet before the plans can be implemented for a three hundred million investment in central Taiwan. The religion law in Taiwan dictates that all religion groups should register as a "corporate body" with a director board for the convenience of management and administration. As a religion, Shanyan Jiao has registered as a corporate body. However, the governing of internal affairs, including inheritance and all kinds of activities, is regulated by the Clan Law

(zhong fa) of Shanyan Jiao. To avoid confrontation between the two governing units most of the director board members of the corporate body of Shanyan Jiao are also high ranking members in the Clan Law system. Eight director board members were nominated in the last meeting. In addition, the director board of the corporate body was assumed to have executive power regarding Shanyan Jiao's external business investment. This leads to the problem that some of the representatives, who were not nominated for being included in the director board of the corporate body, disagreed the proposal that the director board should be an executive unit due to the fear of losing power. The meeting lasted almost four hours. The present author attended the meeting as an external observer. With the consent of the representatives the meeting was tape recorded.

The Participants

Eleven Shanyan Jiao representatives attend the meeting (pseudo names are used here for confidentiality):

- K. Lin: The secretary-in-general of Shanyan Jiao. He is 43 years old and has been a member of Shanyan Jiao for 22 years. In this meeting he represented the president of Shanyan Jiao (the president is 94 years old and is hospitalized due to sickness) to preside over the meeting.
- T. Lee: A lecturer of Shanyan Jiao. He is 84 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 39 years. He served the position of secretary-in-general and the director of preaching center. He is the key figure in this case analysis.
- C. Chen: He is 76 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 31 years. He is the accountant of Shanyan Jiao.

- C. Chang: A local representative. He is 72 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 28 years. He is the current director of preaching center.
- L. Chiang: A local representative. He is 75 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 31 years.
- D. Jian: A local representative. He is 52 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 22 years.
- W. Cheng: A local representative. He is 68 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 26 years.
- N. Tsen: The vice president of Shanyan Jiao. He is 74 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 29 years. He is the person who nominated the eight direct board members.
- S. Tsen: A local representative. She is 70 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 29 years.
- L. Wang: The PR representative. She is 54 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 18 years.
- P. Chen: A local representative. He is 71 years old and has been in Shanyan Jiao for 25 years.

The Scenario

The meeting was arranged in a special room of a Chinese restaurant in Taipei. K. Lin asked the participants to sign their names and explained that the president of Shanyan Jiao asked him to chair the meeting. He insisted that he is not qualified enough for serving as the chair because he is the youngest person in the meeting. Consequently, W. Chen was elected as the chair because he is much "clean" in the power struggling

network of Shanyan Jiao. Before the meeting officially started T. Lee suddenly interrupted the conversation:

> *I am 84 years old now, I have been in this religion for almost 40 years, and I am very close to the end line of my life. I want to let you know that I am going to play the "black face" (bad person) role in this meeting. If we have "love" in our heart, we should know how to peacefully handle today's discussion. Let us not get too emotional.*

K. Lin explained that the meeting will follow the formal procedure and told the chair that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss and approve the minutes, especially the ten items about the administration of cooperate body, from the last meeting. He then tried to read the ten items. But right after he finished the first item about the approval of the eight candidates for the board of director. T. Lee (who is not one of the candidates) immediately jumped in:

> *Hold it. What do you mean by saying "to follow the formal procedure?" We must first decide that the director board should only function as a supervision rather than an executive unit, or the discussion will be very unpleasant.*

T. Lee then continued to state what he has done and what kind of hardship he ever experienced in his 39-year service in Shanyan Jiao. Then he concluded emotionally after about 18 minutes talking:

> *We don't need any kind of law (i.e., corporate body) to confine our behaviors. Any one who likes and has the ability to do things should just go ahead and do it for Shanyan Jiao. All the ten items are not the key issues we should focus. What we need is to discuss how to develop the business of Shanyan Jiao based on*

individual willingness and ability. I am very old now, but I will continue to preach the doctrines of Shanyan Jiao. I have no strength to fight with any person, but I think it will be totally meaningless if you insist to follow the procedure to discuss the ten items.

While the chair and K. Lin tried to explain the necessity of forming the director board, T. Lee jumped in again:

We should just discuss what we should do. There is no need to make any decision regarding the last meeting's minutes, because I doubt the legitimacy of the minutes. We should let every person here express their opinions. We then can draw conclusions from all the opinions. I suggest to have our two elders (refers to C. Chen and L. Chiang) talk first.

The chair had no choice but followed T. Lee's "command." Each participant began to raise their opinions. During this period, T. Lee often interrupted the speaker making comments or correcting what they said. Almost all the participants emphasized the important of harmony in this kind of meeting and in handling the Shanyan Jiao's affairs. After every participant expressed their opinions K. Lin continued to persuade the chair that the minutes need to be reviewed and approved, because "*we can't legally do anything without these items approved by us.*" However, T. Lee acted as he is the chair by blocking K Lin's opinion:

Those items are useless shit. We should have no more discussion about them. The report from every participant should be the records of today's meeting. In conclusion, "peacefully united" is the theme of today's gathering. The records

should show that the director board is only a supervision unit. The headquarters of Shanyan Jiao (based on the Clan Law) should be in charge of all decisions.

He then threatened to "open fire" if the records won't show the conclusions he just mentioned. Finally, he said:

Yes, we need to have a conclusion. And "peace" and "unity" are the conclusions. I hope we all have a warm and peaceful New Year Eve tonight.

The meeting was then ended after almost 4 hours with no decision made concerning the original agenda of the meeting.

The Analyses

The scenario reflects the impact of seniority on the Chinese decision making process.[1] In this case, the 84-year-old T. Lee is the most senior person in the group. He does not occupy a high ranking position, but using his seniority he successfully blocked the progress of the meeting. From my perspective, as an observer, the 4-hour meeting was a waste because no any item in the original agenda was discussed. The power and authority originated from seniority were obviously abused in this case.

Through the whole process of the meeting I found that seniority-related vocabularies were used very often when the participants were expressing their opinions. To the younger participants, they would say "*I know that I am not old enough, but…*" To the older participants, they would say "*I am so old that…*" This is the strategy T. Lee used to induce pressures to K. Lin and the chair. For example, when the 72-year-old C. Chang expressed his opinions, he said: "*I am only 72 years old, and he (T. Lee) is 84 years old. I know I cannot compete with him because he is more powerful...*" C. Chang

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[1]

is superior to T. Lee in the official position, but he knew T. Lee is more powerful because he is older and has served in Shanyan Jiao much longer than him. T. Lee interrupted C. Chang, "*Both of us are old. Let's have the young one (refers to the 52-year-old D. Jian) say something.*" D. Jian accepted the invitation and said, *"I am still so young, but I want to raise a very practical issue…"*

Not only the interactions among participants show the influence of seniority on discussions, the age of participants also clearly indicate the important role seniority plays in the process of decision making. Most of them are over 68 years old. In other words, it is this group of high aged people who make the important decision about the future of Shanyan Jiao.

Analyzing the case from the perspective of the five components of decision making, we can see that, as indicated above, seniority is like the edge of a knife that can either facilitate or paralyze the decision making process. In most cases (e.g., Chung, 1996) seniority in Chinese world serves as lubricant that is used to establish a harmonious atmosphere by smoothing down the conflict within or between groups. In this case, however, T. Lee employed his power embedded in his seniority to paralyze the decision making process. In the meeting he strategically used terms such as "peace" and "unity" to create a false image that he tried to keep the group harmony. Actually, his intention was to prevent the group members from discussing the agenda items, lest he should be excluded from the power circle of the director board. T. Lee's action represents a case of abusing power of seniority for personal purpose that reflects a totally different pattern of Chinese decision making.

The Chinese culture values collectivism, interdependence, group-orientation, cooperation, harmony, circular thinking, group loyalty, conformity, holistic thinking, and indirect communication (Chang & Holt, 1991; Chen, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997; Chen & Chung, 1994; Chu, 1983; Hwang, 1988; Jocobs, 1979; Ma, 1992; Pye, 1982; Yum, 1988). These value orientations lead the Chinese, in regard to the locus of control in the decision making process, to attribute the power of decision making to the group by sharing the responsibility in which the leader only functions to facilitate the process of decision making. Nevertheless, in this case T. Lee directed the meeting from the beginning to the end. He arbitrarily interrupted whenever he liked to. He even mentioned that he will take all the responsibilities for the decisions made in that meeting. He stated:

> *We don't need to discuss the minutes. We just need to have every one here to have a report. These reports will be the records of today's meeting. If there is anything wrong with this, I will take the full responsibility.*

In regard to initiation and coordination, T. Lee neglected the emphasis on frequent discussion and prior consultation for initiating ideas in the process of Chinese decision making. He jumped in very often during the meeting. For example, as quoted above, he jumped in when K. Lin said that the meeting will follow a formal procedure by initiating that the group should first decide the function of the director board. He also insisted that no discussion on the minutes should be made, and "peace" and "unity" should be the conclusions of the meeting. Interestingly, by this way he acted as he is the chair trying to coordinate the progress of the meeting. For example, he stopped one of the participants, "*that's enough, let's have the next speaker*." My observation showed that it is T. Lee, rather than the chair, who controlled the progress of the meeting.

Similar to the Japanese, consensus is the most common way for the mode of Chinese decision making. Individual or split decision is not recommendable. The influence of seniority in this case made it impossible to reach a real consensus in the meeting. From the beginning to the end of the meeting T. Lee arbitrarily made decisions for the group. Examples include

> "*Let's all know this, we need no collective leadership. Let those who are willing to take the responsibility do the job.*"
>
> "*You will not serve as the accountant of the director board.*" (He interrupted C. Chen when he was speaking)
>
> "*Let's express our opinions and see if we can come to a conclusion.*"
>
> "*Let's turn to the other speaker*" (He stopped C. Chen when he was speaking)
>
> "*Don't worry about time, I'll call a taxi carrying you home tonight*" (He interrupted when the chair, W. Chen, mentioned that the meeting cannot take too long because he has to take the last train back home that is about 5 hours driving distance).

I observed that every suggestion made by T. Lee immediately became a decision, because the following discussion always moved to the direction T. Lee suggested.[2] The consensus in this situation is only a false image that is supported by the silence of group members.

"Group harmony" is the main criterion of Chinese decision making. There is no doubt that harmony was emphasized by all group members in the meeting. However, I found that most of them advocated harmony with a disturbing mind inside. Harmony in this sense is only a superficial product that sacrificed the effectiveness and efficiency of

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the group decision making. For example, although T. Lee kept using terms such as "love," "brotherhood," "peace," "unity," and "cooperation" he actually used them to cover his imbalanced or unhappy feeling that were occasionally revealed in his expressions. It is only about 20 minutes at the beginning of the meeting, he stated,

> *Let's harmoniously discuss this.... Be cooperative and united....* (became emotionally) *Collective leadership? That's not the way we should do. If you insist this, then it becomes meaningless to continue the meeting"*

In one occasion, T. Lee even said:

> *Oh, God! We have been here for over two and half hours... What's the shit usefulness of those articles...* (angrily) *Do we after all have to pull out the dying president from the hospital and put him to death here for deciding what we are supposed to do?*

Finally, indirect and unconfrontational communication style should dominate the Chinese decision making process. In this case, this principle was not applied to T. Lee, who is the most senior person in the group. I observed that the chair and other members younger than T. Lee made great efforts to avoid confronting others or directly putting negative words on other members. Nevertheless, T. Lee always directly expressed what are in his mind and confront others by interrupting their speaking. Obviously, based on my observation, I found T. Lee took the advantage of the inherent authority and power embedded in seniority.

Conclusion

Traditionally, seniority or the elders was valued by most human societies. Those Confucianism-influenced societies, especially Far Eastern nations, continue to show their

respect to the elders. The senior enjoy the authority and power not only in the household but also in private or public organizations. People use honorific language and government institutes law to require people to show their respect to the elders. The age of high ranking national leaders and organizational executives tend to be old. Their influence extends to after their retirement and until their death. Thus, seniority plays a critical role in these societies to reinforce and perpetuate their cultural values and traditions. However, in some special situations seniority can be used for personal gains or other inappropriate purposes. This situation usually leads to an anomaly of social behaviors that run into the opposite directions of social or cultural norms.

The present study reflects this kind of anomaly in the process of Chinese decision making by case analyzing a meeting of high ranking representatives of a large religion group in Taiwan. The findings demonstrate the dynamic and complex nature of decision making in terms of its dialectic relationship with culture. As previously indicated, our behavior is the mirror of our culture. Culture provides us a set of thinking pattern that leads to a specific way of action. However, in certain situation culture may lose its power of regulating members' behaviors. To understand this kind of deviation from cultural value orientations is crucial for reaching an authentic awareness of a culture. Unfortunately, most intercultural communication scholars overlook this kind of research. This study presents an example for the direction of future research in this line of research.

The dynamic and complex nature of decision making explicated in this study suggests that Chinese decision making is a multi-facet process in which a prominent cultural value can be consciously or unconsciously used as a tool to implicitly or explicitly shaken the other core values. The findings jut out the importance of Chinese

communication specified by Chung (1996) and Hwang (1997). Chung proposed a model of multilevel cultures for Chinese decision making. The model stipulates three levels of Chinese decision making from the perspective of political conflict resolution. The most inner level is the conflict party (i.e., the decision makers), then the primary-level culture (i.e., the political party), and finally the secondary-level culture (i.e., the general public). The impact of cultural values on decision making within each level and between the levels may show a great variation. Hwang proposed a model of conflict resolution in Chinese society. A matrix of Chinese conflict resolution, based on the interaction between the three levels of Chinese interpersonal relationship types (i.e., vertical in-group, horizontal in-group, and horizontal out-group) and four behavioral variables (i.e., harmony maintenance, personal goal attainment, coordination strategies, and dominant responses), was developed to explain possible strategies the Chinese select to use, including those are contrary to the Chinese cultural values such as confrontation, direct communication, and defiance. The two models deserve a further examination for future research.

Finally, a potential limitation of data collection method employed in this study needs to be mentioned. While participant observation method is a useful way for collecting in-depth data, it may also jeopardize the validity of the data. One example in this study is that in the middle of the meeting T. Lee suddenly said to the author, "*Mr. XX, you are a Ph.D., you are much more knowledgeable than us here. In your opinion what should we do in this situation...*" As an observer, I kindly rejected his invitation to express my opinions. However, I detected that occasionally they said something only

because I was there. In other words, I suspect that some of the opinions expressed by the group members might be different if I were absent or did not tape record the discussion. To avoid this kind of inherent methodology problems would always be a challenge for scholars conducting participant observation research.

Notes.

1. I talked with some of the participants next day about this issue. They mentioned that T. Lee's authoritarian behaviors in the meeting might be caused by the fact that he is not one of the eight candidates for the director board. However, they all agreed that it is T. Lee's seniority that led him to influence the decision making process. Unfortunately, the power embedded in seniority was used to vent his unhappy feeling for not being nominated. Although T. Lee kept emphasized that "peace" and "unity" are the goal of the meeting, the negative impact of seniority on decision making is clearly exemplified in this case.
2. I asked three of the participants next day whether they feel satisfied with those suggestions (made by T. Lee) that became decisions. In other words, I wanted to know whether they were really consensual with T. Lee. They all answered that they didn't like it, but they had no choice, because T. Lee is much older than them and they didn't want to offend him.

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